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SUBJECT: THE RESURRECTION OF FATOS NANO? WE'RE STILL WAITING

REF: A) 07 TIRANA 659, B) 07 TIRANA 637, C) 07 TIRANA 26

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The role of former Prime Minister Fatos Nano in Albanian politics has been debated widely, particularly since his fall from the Prime Ministership and resignation as chair of the Socialist Party (SP) in 2005. Relinquishing the SP mantle to Tirana Mayor Edi Rama seemed uncharacteristic at the time for the man who is an ambitious political operator, and he was expected to rise again. So far his political intentions have not been clarified, and his actions since 2005 lack cohesiveness. Some insiders believe he has shifted his focus to business and personal interests ahead of politics; others expect his political ambition remains unquenched, and he waits only for an opportunity to return prominently to the national scene. Nano's recent flirtation with Movement for Socialist Integration (LSI) Chair and former Prime Minister Ilir Meta has set Tirana abuzz with speculation that his comeback is about to begin. Certainly, few here believe he has departed the political stage for good. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) In 2005, the SP lost its parliamentary majority and its leader, Fatos Nano, lost the post of Prime Minister. He subsequently resigned the party chairmanship and Tirana Mayor Edi Rama was chosen the new leader of the opposition. Fatos Nano, four-time prime minister and chair of the SP since its 1991 beginnings (interrupted only by the four years he spent in jail for corruption), was rejected by the party. He left quietly, returning to his business interests while maintaining his seat in parliament (but participating only rarely in its sessions).

¶3. (SBU) Nano remained a force in the SP, splitting the party with his core group of supporters who had never supported Rama. During the SP's boycott of local elections in early 2007, Nano used his influence against Rama to work behind the scenes (accompanied by public photo ops) with Prime Minister Sali Berisha to negotiate an end to the impasse and set the date and terms for elections. (Ref C) While his influence may not have been decisive, his return sparked rumors that he would quietly continue to assist Berisha in return for his support for the presidency in summer of 2007. Whether or not such a bargain was struck, Nano failed in his presidential bid after the third round of votes, and further fractured the opposition by publicly defining who was for him, and thus against Rama. The MPs who voted for him for president, labeled the "Nano Six" were expelled from their party. (Refs A and B)

¶4. (U) Nano next appeared again to rival Rama in the fall of 2007, taking the leadership of a group of the party who were dissatisfied with Rama's recent changes to the SP structure. He embarked on a grassroots "listening campaign" to shore up his base of political support, only to abandon the effort after just four meetings. Rama proceeded with a remarkably similar approach of his own, which has become a cornerstone of his populist approach to opposition leadership.

15. (U) Since then, some critics of Nano have gone public. In a recent public interview, a former Nano loyalist, SP Member of Parliament Petro Koci, bitterly declared his deep disappointment in Nano, citing his unwillingness to follow through on his own political initiatives since 2005 and his refusal to show leadership (lacking a political platform or vision) despite continuing efforts to shore up a political base. He accused Nano outright of pursuing short-term business interests at the expense of his political supporters, abusing their faith for financial gain while abandoning their causes.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Nano's public handshake with Berisha during the 2006-7 election boycott (Ref C) was not viewed as the triumphant return of a statesman that Nano may have expected. Although the meeting may have achieved a short term goal, the sight of Berisha seeking advice and support from a man rumored the most corrupt in Albanian politics, as well as his former arch rival, smacked of opportunism on both sides. Nano's few initiatives since then - his campaign for the presidency and aborted "listening tour" - have not raised his stock with the public or within his party.

17. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Theories abound regarding Nano's intentions. Conspiracy buffs suggest he was outwitted by a Berisha-Rama agreement to deny him the presidency (by installing Bamir Topi in the position, Rama removed a key Democratic Party operative while Berisha got "his man" in the job) and is waiting for an opportunity to stage a comeback. Others suggest Nano has put politics on hold to focus exclusively on business interests that will increase his personal wealth through existing political and social connections. If this is true, he may have no need at this time for a political role beyond his seat in parliament. Finally, it is possible that Nano's failure to take the presidency last year and the lack of momentum in his most recent political gambles demonstrate that Albania has moved past the Nano era. However, few count him out. His recent public flirtation with LSI's Meta -- who

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soon thereafter announced that LSI was removing itself from the opposition coalition with Rama's SP -- has sparked speculation of a new Nano-Meta partnership in the advent of next year's elections. In sum, few here are willing to discount the wily Nano as a residual force in Albanian politics or underestimate his ability to play hardball in staging a return to the political scene.
WITHERS